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REMARKS

ON

A REPORT OF A COMMITTEE

OF THE

Overseers of Harvard College,

PROPOSING CERTAIN CHANGES,

RELATING TO THE INSTRUCTION AND DISCIPLINE OF THE COLLEGE;

READ MAY 4, 1824, AND TO BE TAKEN INTO
CONSIDERATION JUNE 1, 1824.

BY ONE, LATELY A MEMBER
OF THE IMMEDIATE GOVERNMENT OF THE COLLEGE.

Andrews Norton
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REMARKS.

HAVING received through the post-office a printed copy of the Report mentioned in the title-page, I shall make it the subject of a few remarks. My connexion with the College, though intimate, is such, that its adoption would in no way affect me through any merely personal interest or private feeling. I am not exposed, therefore, to the imputation of any improper motive, and consequently, not under the restraint from feelings of delicacy, which may, in the present stage of the business, prevent the officers of the Immediate Government (I mean the resident officers of instruction and discipline constituting the body so called) from publicly expressing those objections which they must entertain. My motive for writing is a deep conviction that some of the leading changes proposed in the Report will affect the interests of the College essentially and most injuriously. This motive would be sufficient to justify any member of the community in taking the same course; and in endeavouring at least to prevent the adoption of these changes, till their necessary effects have been fairly and fully considered.

There are various suggestions contained in the Report, and probably a very considerable part of it, in which I should concur. But I do not undertake to say what might be the opinions of other gentlemen, *practically acquainted with the subject*. It seems to have been a fundamental mistake throughout the transaction of this business, that the officers of the Immediate Government of the College have not been constantly and freely consulted; but on the contrary, that the plan has been devised without any direct consultation on the part of the Committee, with those who are practically acquainted with the subject; who must carry it into execution, if it be ever

executed ; and whose judgment, therefore, ought to have been enlisted, and whose feelings strongly interested in its favor. To parts of the plan there appear to be the strongest objections ; and to these portions of it, it is to be hoped the attention of the Overseers will be particularly directed.

The first leading feature that may be mentioned, is the giving to the President new powers in relation to the other officers, a "complete visitatorial authority" over them, and a negative upon all their acts and proceedings. The power given to the heads of the proposed new departments, into which the College is to be divided in reference to different branches of study, is liable in its degree to the same objections as the new discretionary power given to the President. The change proposed, in so greatly increasing the authority and influence of the latter officer, appears to proceed from an erroneous view of the causes of the present evils in the state of the College, and to be such as will tend essentially to aggravate these evils.

One of the first things to be done to raise the reputation of the College, is to give the officers of the College, *as such*, a higher standing with the community, to make their offices an object of honorable ambition, to treat them with all the deference and estimation which is due to the most important officers of one of the highest literary institutions of our country ; to take every proper means to bring together men of the first talents, the most extensive learning, the most correct morals, the soundest judgment ; and when such men are thus collected, to make the best use of their powers, by affording them every facility in employing those powers for the benefit and improvement of the College ; by committing the institution, as it were, into their hands ; not by degrading them to the rank of mere ministerial officers, and subjecting them to the discretionary government of an individual. There need be no hesitation in saying, that the mode in which the officers of the College have for some time been treated, is, in many respects, the reverse of this course of conduct ; and the consequent ill effects upon the institution have been sufficiently apparent. The proposals now made will tend to depress them still further. They are to be submitted, as mere ministerial officers, to the authority of the Overseers, the Corporation, the President, and the heads of departments among themselves. They ought to be responsible only to the public through the Overseers ; excepting always their responsibility to their own consciences, their own sense

of honor, their own feeling of reputation, and their own strong interest in the prosperity of the institution. The system of government proposed is foreign from the whole spirit which breathes around us in our republican habits and institutions; and is such as no man of proper feelings would submit to, unless the necessities of a family compelled him to make a choice between different duties, his duty to himself and his duty to those dependent upon him. It is proposed to separate the officers of the College from all the other members of the community, and to erect a little despotism, of which they are to be the subjects. The power given to the President is in its nature arbitrary and irresponsible, dependent merely on his own judgment and will, such as is not exercised by any other individual in the country, and such as I trust in the good providence of God, never will be.

Upon what grounds, I would ask, is it supposed that the President will possess such a decided superiority over his colleagues, in good sense and correct notions of discipline, that his simple negative ought to annul what three or four of their number, or all the heads of the executive boards, may have unanimously decided; and how is it imagined possible to support any discipline in the College, if a student, upon the infliction of a punishment, may appeal from the decision of his immediate governors to another officer, state his case personally to him, and hope from him a reversal of his sentence? If it be said that the power will never be exercised, it is worse than nugatory to grant it. But the first instance in which it is exercised, the authority of the officers whose sentence is reversed, will be prostrated. To make an express provision for the reversal of punishments in the ordinary routine of College government, is to make a provision to destroy the government itself.

“The President,” it is proposed, “shall have an independent and *responsible* negative upon all the acts and proceedings of the other Boards and Departments in the University.” But what can be meant by the epithet as thus used? To whom will the President be responsible for the exercise of his discretion; or how can any public officer be made responsible *for an exercise of discretion*? Supposing a collision between him and any one of the new bodies of government, in which he is clearly in the wrong, what man, or what body of men is to rejudge the case? Is it said that the appeal will be to public

opinion? One answer is, that by the plan proposed, he is provided with every means of influence which can be given him, derived from rank, power, and patronage, to prejudice public opinion in his favor.

The provision made in the plan under consideration, to secure the faithful performance of the duties of the other officers, by the oversight, or as it is called, the "complete visitatorial power" of the President, seems to imply that he alone can be interested in the prosperity of the institution; and that they are to be regarded as a set of idle day-laborers, who will not do their work faithfully without an overseer. Why is it presumed that the President will have this peculiar interest in the good of the College, not felt by the other officers? Suppose he is deficient in this respect; who is to be the overseer of the President? Or if that be effectually provided for, who are to oversee his overseers? This system of compulsory good behaviour, through the constant action of oversight and visitatorial powers, and the fear of reprimand or heavier punishment, will at last be found to rest on nothing. Somewhere or another, in any system for governing the College, the main reliance must be upon men's consciences, and honor, and faithfulness; upon their strong sense of public duty; upon their deep conviction of the importance of the prosperity of the institution to the best interests of the community; upon their desire of honorable reputation and just esteem; and, in the last place, upon their perception that their own private interests are intimately connected with those of the College. These are the motives through which the resident officers are to be addressed. But the present plan directly appeals to none of these motives but the last. This it presents in its humblest form; and on this it rests as a security for the good behaviour of the officers. By bringing this prominently forward, it tends as far as possible to counteract the operation of all higher and more honorable feelings.

It ought to be *one* primary object to make every officer of the College feel, that his personal reputation is involved in the reputation and prosperity of the institution. But the plan now proposed, following up and aggravating the defects of the bad system which has existed, brings forward the President alone as the representative of the College, to take all the praise if the institution flourish, and with such power, and influence, and standing in society, as to be able most probably to shelter

himself from blame, if it do not ; even if its decline be attributable to himself alone. That no gentlemen, such as ought to hold an office in the College, would hereafter accept one, if this form of government were adopted, I am fully persuaded ; and I do not hesitate to extend the remark to the office of President. No man having a just sense of what is due to others, would consent to place himself in such a relation to those who ought to be his equals.

There seems, indeed, to be no reason in the nature of a literary institution, or in any considerations derived from a regard to its best interests, to show that the President of a College should be a different officer from the Dean of a Faculty, that he should be any thing more than *primus inter pares*, presiding among his colleagues, but taking his part at the same time in all their duties, particularly in the duty of instruction. That the office of the President of Harvard College is of a different character, is perhaps an evil necessarily connected with other existing evils in the constitution of the College, and which must remain till they are removed. The President of a College should act in all important concerns with his colleagues in the government ; and the proper and appropriate duties of his office, in such a case, would demand little more of his time, than corresponding duties would demand of their time. He would preside in meetings at which they would be present. To give him other duties, by making him the arbitrary governor of the institution, is to create his office into an intolerable evil. To leave him without any other than the proper and appropriate duties of his office, is to render it nearly a sinecure, an office for parade only. But this is too showy and expensive an appendage for a literary institution. I do not mean to say, that according to the present constitution of Harvard College, the President is not called upon to perform important duties in which his colleagues have no share. The question is, whether it is desirable that this state of things should continue ? But whatever answer may be given to this question, it will not affect the force of the preceding considerations ; and a more proper time may occur for its discussion.

I shall now remark upon the plan for six different governments, if I have counted rightly, to administer the discipline of the College. Strict uniformity of discipline is a fundamental requisite to the good government of the College, but nothing could easily be devised more adapted to prevent the attain-

ment of this object, than the breaking up of the College government into six distinct governments. It is impossible that they should exercise the discipline of the College upon the same principles and with the same feelings. The officers now residing within the College buildings have frequent communications with each other for mutual advice and assistance, and for the purpose of preserving uniformity of discipline. This is proper, and is all that is necessary, beside the general meetings of the government.

The plan now proposed, by taking away from individual officers the power of inflicting any punishment; by rendering a meeting of three officers necessary to inflict the most trifling; and by subjecting their decision to the reversal of the President, would tend effectually to destroy the authority and respectability of all the other officers in the eyes of the students. When to this we add the delay which must often take place in the infliction of punishment, keeping up, while it continues, a state of irritation among those who are expecting it, and among their friends; the necessary want of uniformity, before adverted to, in the manner in which discipline will be administered by five or six different bodies, sometimes even while acting upon offences of the same character, committed at the same time; the consequent occasion which will take place for the President to interpose his power to reverse, or to modify and equalize, their sentences; the triumph which will follow of a portion of the students over those governors whose sentence is reversed or softened, and the disagreement which will be produced among the governors themselves; when all these things are considered, I believe the plan now proposed will strike every one, who has learned any thing from personal experience in administering the discipline of the College, as being in effect rather a plan for producing insubordination and anarchy, than a plan of government.

Passing over the division of the instructors into departments, which seems a measure of very doubtful expediency, it may now be asked what sufficient reason there is for increasing the number and length of the recitations. Three recitations in a day, beside the other college exercises, are to be attended by every student; and they are to be longer, it is said, and '*more searching* than at present.' It is intended, therefore, that they shall be in great part mere examinations, mere modes of determining whether a student has

properly occupied his time. So far as they are intended to answer this end, it may be made a question whether, instead of increasing their number and length, they do not already occupy too much of the time of the students. In regard to those students who are, or who *may be*, acted upon by higher motives, to those who do not require, or who require but in a small degree, this compulsory process for producing diligence, such a supervision over every two or three hours to be spent in study, such frequent calls to be examined and to be present at a long examination of others, will be not merely irksome; they will be a useless consumption of a large portion of their time. As far as these exercises are intended to afford an opportunity to the teacher for oral instruction, the frequency and length proposed seem wholly unnecessary.

In the remainder of the report there are many proposed regulations which may be approved, and some which seem objectionable. Among the latter may be particularly mentioned, the proposal that every student's room should be visited by an officer at nine o'clock in the evening. As a large portion of the students are scattered about in rooms in different dwellinghouses in the town, at the distance of at least half a mile from each other; the proposal seems hardly practicable. If the visitation should be confined to the rooms in the college buildings, its principal effect would be to lead those inclined to irregularity, to take rooms in the town. But it seems objectionable on other grounds. Such kind of inspection degrades the officers. It takes from them that influence with the students which is of more importance, as regards the true objects to be aimed at in the discipline of the College, than the enforcing of any amount of rules of such a character. It is treating the whole body of students as suspected persons; and tends to produce irritation and reaction on their part, and generally a state of feeling unfavorable to the operation of those motives, on which the main reliance must be placed as a security for their good conduct.

Generally speaking, in the plan proposed, the security for the good conduct of the students, (much as in the case of the officers,) is made to rest principally upon constant supervision and coercive discipline, with little reference to higher motives, and little attempt to devise means for bringing them into operation. In this respect the plan seems to be essentially defective, and to present only a partial system, which operating alone would be found not merely inadequate to the

end proposed; but more likely, it is to be feared, to produce an opposite result, than that which is intended.

The plan, now under consideration, taken as a whole, does not seem to afford any settled and distinct conception of the character which it is proposed to give to the College. Is it to be a University? One would think that this should be gradually aimed at. Yet such frequent recitations as are proposed are not common in any literary institution, which approaches that character. The circumstances likewise in which all the resident instructors are to be placed, and the duties imposed upon them, are such, as must hereafter prevent their stations from being filled by such men as ought to hold the offices of a University, in order to give it any respectability. Is the college then to be degraded to the rank of a high school? What reason in that case can there be for deferring the admission of students till the age of sixteen? How is such a purpose consistent with the proposal on which the report is grounded, that of giving a more thorough education, and leading young men to higher attainments, that of approximating the standard of learning in the College somewhat nearer to the standard of similar institutions in other countries? How is it consistent with the proposal for the admission and instruction of students, who may not wish for a degree, who must in some measure be dispensed from submitting to the strict government proposed over other students, and who, in consequence, would soon, it is probable, amount to a very considerable proportion of the whole number? Why, if such an institution only be intended, should we hereafter wish to increase the means of instruction at Cambridge, since those already existing there are far more than sufficient for the purposes of a high school?

No one, I trust, in consequence of the preceding remarks upon what seem to me the defects of the plan under consideration, will charge me with the foolish vanity of arrogating any superiority of judgment to the gentlemen by whom it has been reported. I have only one advantage which they do not possess. I have been for nearly fifteen years intimately connected with the college; and led, as every one so circumstanced must be, to think and observe much upon the causes which may affect its prosperity or its decline. It is not strange, therefore, if I should perceive the bearing and necessary effects of some proposals, though their consequences may escape the observation of wiser men, without the same

experience, and whose thoughts have not been long directed to the subject. For the talents and integrity of some of the gentlemen who compose the Committee, gentlemen whom I may call my friends, I have in common with the rest of the community, the highest respect. With others of the Committee, I have not the honour of any personal acquaintance; but I have no doubt that they have acted according to their best judgment upon the information, which they possessed, and so far as they were able to give their time to the subject.

But if the plan brought forward be really so defective and objectionable, what other, it may be asked, is to be proposed in its stead. If my views coincided with those expressed in the commencement of the report respecting the present state of the College, I should without hesitation answer, *None*. If the College be in so prosperous a state as is there described, it would seem to be a most hazardous and rash experiment to make any important changes. It would be like giving powerful medicine to a man in health. The old rule, not however exactly applicable to the present subject, is *experimentum in corpore vili*. But my views of the condition of the College, I confess, are different, and such as lead to the conclusion, that important changes are necessary to secure its prosperity and usefulness. The present, however, seems not a proper occasion to enter into any details, or to offer any particular proposals, and I shall, therefore, conclude with only a few general remarks upon the subject.

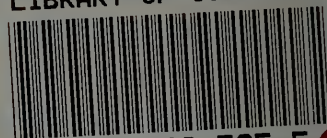
If important changes are to be introduced, they should rest on a broad and deep foundation; they should be made with clear and comprehensive views of what are, or what ought to be, the general purpose and character of the institution; they should be parts of one great system, well understood beforehand; these parts should be properly adjusted to each other; and the plan introduced should contain in itself principles which will give it perpetuity, and afford at the same time the means of constant improvement and growth. In devising such a plan, a great variety of important considerations must be attended to; and many things followed out into their practical details and bearings. Partial measures, which under certain circumstances might be beneficial, may be merely injurious, if not accommodated to the existing state of things, or to the general system proposed. No error is more likely to be prejudicial than a rash adoption of modes of education which have been found to succeed elsewhere, without regard



to the peculiar circumstances of the institution in which they are copied. No reasoning will probably be more deceptive and mischievous, than reasoning from imperfect analogies, in which essential circumstances affecting the character of different institutions, or in which the habits, manners, state of society, and literary wants of different countries are not sufficiently considered. The adoption of important changes in the College, without the general views before spoken of, will tend only to throw the whole system into confusion, and to increase the evils which now exist. The College is a great public concern, through which the literature, morals, reputation, and happiness of our whole nation may be affected. Very much, it is believed, may be done to raise its character, and improve its present condition. But it is not to be approached rashly, or made the subject of uncertain experiments. Whatever is now done should be done with wide views, on a comprehensive plan. To this end, much examination, much thought, much deliberation, and much discussion are necessary. Those practically acquainted with its concerns, and having the strongest private interest in its prosperity, seem obviously pointed out, by these circumstances, as among the first to be consulted; but assistance should at the same time be derived from many others, whose knowledge and judgment qualify them to afford it. The plan finally settled should be supported by the approbation of those who are to execute it, and of the well informed throughout the community. If less than what has been proposed be done, if an imperfect plan be adopted, unsupported by the judgment of the resident officers, or of the community at large, the consequence, we may well fear, will be the deep, perhaps irremediable, injury of the College.

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